

FirstNet Achieves Major Milestone towards Nationwide Network for First Responders

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House lawmakers held a hearing earlier this week to discuss the First Responder Network Authority's (FirstNet) progress in the deployment of the Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network (NPSBN) in light of its recent Request for Proposal (RFP), which marked a major step forward in FirstNet's efforts to modernize communications for first responders.

"This is a significant step for the network because it is the formal structured process that will select our partner who will deploy the NPSBN," said TJ Kennedy, President of FirstNet, at a [hearing](#) held by the House Energy and Commerce Committee's Communications and Technology Subcommittee.

Kennedy continued, "The release of the RFP is the result of three years of hard work beginning with the creation of the Board back in August 2012, establishing the start-up organization of FirstNet, and staffing it with some of the most talented individuals from across the country that are committed to supporting public safety's communication needs."

The release of the RFP follows more than a year of dialogue with public safety and industry on the objectives and scope of the RFP for the FirstNet network. Leading up to the release, FirstNet issued 13 Requests for Information and a set of draft RFP documents, and held two Industry Day public events, as well as meetings with interested vendors.

Capability statements are due no later than March 17, 2016 and proposals must be submitted by April 29, 2016. After reviewing the proposals, Kennedy expects FirstNet to issue a contract award in the fourth quarter of 2016. However, he notes, "Many factors could impact the timing of each RFP milestone."

"Public safety will judge all of us on our ability to conduct a successful RFP, to select a partner that will be able to meet the obligations of the Act, and to deploy a NPSBN that satisfies the needs of public safety personnel throughout the country," said Kennedy. "Anything less will be a failure, and failure is not an option when it comes to public safety."

In his opening remarks, Chairman Greg Walden (R-Ore.) asserted that although FirstNet has reached a crucial milestone with the release of the RFP, many concerns remain. For example, FirstNet plans to operate the network through a single contract that covers all states and territories, which could make it difficult for small and regional companies to participate without partnering with one of the nationwide carriers.

Walden also brought up the issue of economic incentive, questioning what the economic incentive is for the winning bidder of the RFP. Wireless providers have to take on the obligation of building a network to public safety specifications in exchange for a monopoly on public safety

users and a zero interest loan.

Some worry that this is simply a “rehash” of the failed approach of the Federal Communication Commission’s (FCC) 2007 700 MHz D block auction, where the FCC asked the wireless industry to pay \$2 billion for a nationwide license that would come with an obligation to negotiate with, and serve the needs of, public safety. The wireless industry was unwilling to put up the capital to build the network.

Walden commented, “There is a small but growing chorus asking why FirstNet believes that this time will be different.” He added, “But for better or worse, the RFP is in the field. The die is cast.”

Concerns have also been raised over state participation. With the release of the RFP and the anticipated contract award in the fourth quarter of 2016, states will need to understand that opt-out process in order to decide whether to accept FirstNet’s plan or deploy on their own.

David Furth, deputy chief of the FCC’s Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau, said the FCC plans to finalize the details of the opt-out process in advance of the date that FirstNet delivers its proposed state plans to each of the state governors, which FirstNet estimates will occur in the second quarter of 2017.

“We recognize that it is important to provide states and FirstNet with clear and timely guidance on the process that the Commission will use to receive, review, and approve or disapprove alternative state plans as required by the Act,” Furth stated.

In 2014, a [Government Accountability Office \(GAO\) report](#) revealed that FirstNet making progress, but had yet to fully assessed risks and lessons learned, stating, “FirstNet faces a multitude of risks, significant challenges, and difficult decisions in meeting its statutory responsibilities, including how to become a self-funding entity.”

Walden noted, “If FirstNet is able to stay the course to the timeline it has established for the RFP process, proposals will be due just one year after GAO released its report on FirstNet’s progress in establishing the network.”

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